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ABSTRACT

Recent educational and communications advances in Canada have generally bypassed the settlements that are home to more than fifty percent of the inhabitants of the Canadian north--the Indian and Eskimo villages. Radio and Visual Education Network (RAVEN) was developed so that these people would be provided with the means to find existing alternatives or develop alternatives themselves from the ongoing economic/political/social mainstream. RAVEN is a two-way single sideband radio, operating from a central headquarters on one of the reserves under direction of Indian people, which allows information to be passed rapidly and efficiently to people in the outlying villages. The information can then be passed from village to village; the people can exchange information and discuss it, get more immediate attention from government departments, and find out how to handle current problems. RAVEN uses videotapes for visual communication, and Super 8 movie film to record cultural activities so that ceremonies and traditions can be preserved. Since people in urban areas also suffer from lack of information about matters which concern them, perhaps this model of two-way information systems could be adapted for use in urban areas. (Author/SH)

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NEIGHBOURHOODS OF THE AIR

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With the development of two-way communication networks, it has been possible to create new electronic communities for people who are geographically separate. Instead of trying to solve the problem of rural isolation by moving the people to the urban centres, an attempt is being made to use urban technological developments in order to allow the native people to continue their rural existence.

Several types of media equipment are being used under the RAVEN (Radio and Visual Education Network) scheme--primarily a private radio system which is the first of its kind in North America to be controlled by, and to cater exclusively to, a minority group. The two-way capability of the radio system is especially important in providing rapid and effective access to information at the time when it is needed and requested.

However, people in urban areas, as well as rural and native people, also suffer from lack of information about matters which concern them. The mass media provide a great deal of information of a general nature but little of a local and specific nature. An individual now finds it increasingly hard to obtain the information he wants either because of the quantity or because of difficulties of access. It is suggested that perhaps the model of two-way information systems being developed by RAVEN and other native communications groups in Canada could be adapted for use in urban areas.

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A. BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Eighty-five per cent of the population of Canada huddles in a string along the U.S. border. For a multiplicity of reasons - including motives of economic development, pressures of world population and the failure of other North American cities to become humanly desirable places to live - Canada's northern stretches cannot long remain so virtually uninhabited. As the company towns increase in size and number, the complex of railway, highway, telephone, airline and person-to-person networks spreads in ever more intricate patterns across the vast stretches and north into the Arctic tundra. As it does so, however, it bypasses the settlements that are home to more than fifty per cent of the inhabitants of the Canadian north - the Indian and Eskimo villages. They are not part of the ongoing economic-political-social mainstream, and so remain outside the communications and transportation networks that feed its life.

The oversight is not deliberate, but when a native village does benefit by a major road, air route or telephone system, it is equally accidental. On the other hand, the government and people of Canada are charged with the responsibility of providing adequate educational facilities and the means of economic advancement to the native population. The system of Indian Affairs schools, training and relocation plans and information dissemination programs are recognized by everyone as necessary expenditures, but by hardly anyone as successful ventures. The drop-out rate is high, unemployment rampant and welfare costs exorbitant.

One solution proposed has been to eliminate these out-of-the-way communities altogether, relocating their inhabitants in urban centres and training them for gainful employment. But it is too late. This course of action cannot do other than create ghetto-like reserves of still unemployed Indians in the heart of the cities instead of in the rural areas. Canada is

at the moment undergoing some wracking social and economic tensions. It is becoming clear already that we do not need all the people that we are graduating from our technical institutions, high schools, and universities. A system of guaranteed annual wage is under consideration during this session of Parliament.

It seems quite clear to us that the cure for unemployment in present circumstances cannot be, even for Indians, to educate them for jobs that will not exist. In addition, the extraordinary cultural and social adjustments that have to be made by a rural fishing and hunting population in order to live in a city seem too high a price to pay for the uncertainties involved. Moreover, the American Indian of the Northwest coast, which includes British Columbia, developed one of the most elaborate cultures found on either of the two continents of the Americas. He has a rich history and reason to be proud of his social and cultural heritage. Relocating these people in urban environments for jobs and ways of life that promise less than total success and little more than a share in the alienation of the North American urban dweller, seems hardly to be the only alternative open to these people and to those who would plan for them.

Talking with their leaders and considering their dilemma in the light of recent educational advances and of communications developments, revealed that at least a first step would be to provide these people with the means to find existing alternatives and/or if possible to develop alternatives for themselves. This is what brought RAVEN (Radio and Visual Education Network) into being. The urgent need of these people was for access to the information they needed in order to face intelligently some of the momentous decisions they were being asked to make. At the same time, it seemed important that we not replicate the system of one-way centralized broadcasting, that would "lay on" these people from the outside,

views, opinions and information that were not necessarily the most appropriate to them or that would be expressed in ways not readily comprehensible to them. It seemed clear that the communications system would have to be run by Indian people for Indian people and that they would need to be able to learn from other Indian communities as well as from outside sources.

We were aware as well of the effectiveness for learning of the opportunity for active participation. It remains one of our central operating hypotheses that much of the alienation and sense of powerlessness experienced by people in North America is due to the nature of our communications system. While we have most efficient means of transmitting information to the masses, we have as yet no comparable means for the millions to express their reactions and to make their voices effectively heard. It is with providing means for effective feedback and for catering to the special needs of minority groups - for creating "neighbourhoods of the air" if you like - that RAVEN is concerned. We are emphasizing the importance, particularly for members of underprivileged groups, of the capacity to talk back, to make their voices heard, to ask their questions and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

B. OPERATION OF THE NETWORK

The backbone then of the network is TWO-WAY single sideband radio. The idea was modeled somewhat on the Schools of the Air and the Flying Doctor Service of Australia. More modern and reliable communications, developed only within the past five years, now make such communications possible in the fjorded and mountainous coastal region of British Columbia. The federal government has assigned to the RAVEN network, three (nor four) private operating frequencies, the first such assignment of private radio frequencies to a minority group in North America.

The idea is that from the central headquarters on one of the reserves

on the coast, information can be passed rapidly and efficiently to people in the outlying villages, many of which up to this time had not even a radio telelphone for emergencies. They can be given by those Indians, who have had greater opportunity to learn, the information that they need in order to make some of the decisions they are being called upon to make. They can learn of the real prospects awaiting an Indian in the city who finishes his education; they can hear of the medical and health facilities available once they know how to get access to them. In addition they can discuss all this information between communities, talking from village to village about matters of mutual concern. They can exchange information about what Indian people of different cultures are doing across the continent to preserve their heritage and at the same time to take advantage of the ongoing economic activity that surrounds them in twentieth-century North America. They can get more immediate attention from the government departments and other bodies, for the settlement of their grievances. They can find out which form in what department is appropriate to handle a current problem; they can given their reactions to the decisions of the Minister of Indian Affairs about health care matters, or educational improvisations. Many communities will no doubt be listerners for long periods of time, but the potential and the ability to make their voices heard will be there. Some movements of information, particularly when they are more complex and more directly educational require a visual component. RAVEN has chosen the half-inch videotape recorder as its means of visual communications. These are very simple, easy-to-operate pieces of equipment that enable each community to produce its own television programmes, to ship the tapes it has made and to play back tapes that may be sent to it, either from the control centre or from other communities. It is a means for them to see at first hand the ministers and officials who are making decisions about their lives, to determine not only

by words but by tone of voice and facial expression, what their opinion about new policies and legislation will be. They in turn, can make tapes and have these shipped to the capital in Ottawa some three thousand miles away, to present their cases firsthand to the people who have the power to change the situation.

Lastly, for what is becoming increasingly important to these people - the preservation of their cultural heritage - we are using full colour Super 8 movie film. The request received repeatedly from communities is to record their dances, ceremonies and traditions while the old people are still alive. This seems to us to underscore the importance to these people of their way of life and of finding a way of delaying the disintegration of their traditional communities, at least until we have time to see what new patterns of community organization on the next decades may hold for all of us.

Just what RAVEN will be able to accomplish and how it will develop is still a largely open question. What is cerntain is that is it the first major project that has ever been under the direction of the Indian people themselves. They are careful to take no funds from the federal department of Indian Affairs. They want to work with them on a contract basis only, in order to retain control and direction of the network. RAVEN is important not only for individual lives within the Indian communities of British Columbia, but also for the implications it has for developments on a worldwide scale.

The transporting of videotapes and the TWO-WAY communications possibilities on the radio foreshadow to some extent the potential that we will have, with the advent of cablevision and of satellite communications, for regional and neighbourhood networks. One of the questions facing us in North America is the great power exerted on the population by the centrally controlled mass communications media. A relatively small handful of people determine what will be viewed and what heard

by millions of people all over the globe. Mass media have been seen as the dominant force in the development of a world monoculture. It seems not outside the range of possibility that the structure of societies, their values and goals, inter-personal relationships, attitudes of co-operation and competition can become as profoundly affected as Coca-Cola is superficially widespread.

To those of us whose primary orientation is toward the human aspects of society rather than toward the economic and industrial ones, the spectre of increasing urbanization coupled with the impact of ever more efficient mass media presages planetary disaster. It seems fundamental, in the light of evolutionary theory, that the greater the variety in human modes of living, the greater the chances for successful adaptation, and hence for survival of the species. Obversely, it may be hypothesized that the more we become alike, the more our living patterns resemble one another, the less our chances of coping successfully with the changing environment. Quite apart from the ultimate survival question, some of us become upset from what might be called the aesthetic point of view. A world monoculture threatens, if nothing else, to be boring. Variety and differentiation in the patterns of human culture seems to us a valuable asset to be preserved. For those who have either grown up in North America or spent years there, the current spread of the American way of life gives impetus to our search for ways to preserve the alternatives.

C. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

None of us can stem the tide of technology. What we can do is to try to envision ways that technology can be made to serve human needs rather than vice-versa. Marshall McLuhan has pointed out that uniformity is not necessarily the effect of the electronic age as it was of the industrial one. Computerization in fact gives us a vast potential for coping with diversity, the individually tailored, the one of a kind. Now, he points out, hardly any two cars off the

Detroit assembly line are exactly alike. The computer allows us to cope with a fantastic variety of individualized combinations of optional equipment, motor sizes and chassis styles.

Similarly, advances in communications systems, notably cablevision, will enable individual regions and neighbourhoods to put television channels to their own special uses. We will have the potential to form, more efficiently than RAVEN can do at present, what we may in time refer to as "network neighbourhoods". We can use communications technology, not just for the needs of commerce and the necessities of living, but for the more intangible needs of sharing interests and opinions, increasing individual political effectiveness and stemming loneliness and the fear born of ignorance and isolation.

It has been repeatedly observed that people gather in cities of at least a certain size for the multiplicity of opportunities for contacts, job promotion and selection, and for entertainment and cultural activities that an urban centre can provide. On the other hand, the resultant alienation, isolation and loneliness that can be the lot of the city-dweller has often been traced to the largeness and impersonality associated with the North American and European city. The remedy tried by community development workers and neighbourhood block associations is to form within the larger city, units small enough for people to relate to one another and for the individual to feel his contribution is of some value. Perhaps this idea of neighbourhood or community units need not be confined to a geographical area alone. It is possible that neighbourhood may come to mean neighbourhood of interest or neighbourhood of cultural background or neighbourhood of common endeavour.

It seems fairly certain, for example, that the Indian people of coastal British Columbia will not soon live in houses side by side on the same street in a given area of an urban centre. The overall economic pressures and the cultural renewal that is taking place within the Indian community suggest that they may

for some years continue to live as they are, scattered among inlets and on nearly inaccessible islands. Nevertheless, through RAVEN, they can form a functional sub-system within the larger society. It is to the preservation of these sub-systems and to the search for means of maintaining their viability that we have addressed our efforts and our research.

It has been often remarked that the coaxial cable and the computer terminal may be to urban development in the second half of this century what the railroad was in the nineteenth and the automobile in the first half. Marshall McLuhan has spoken of "communicating to work". The pattern of commuters living in suburbs, moving in awkward vehicles into a city centre to crowd it by day and leave it abandoned by night may abate and then disappear. It is possible that for many things we do not need to go to an office, and it is certain that for many things we will not have to go to a shop, to a bank or to a school. From our own living rooms we shall be able to pay bills by telephone, buy clothes through our computer terminal and attend meetings on closed circuit television.

The degrees of freedom open to many of us in the choice of where we shall live and where we shall play as well as where we shall work, will be vastly wider than they are at the moment. Similarly, the freedom of planners who make the decisions about the communities in which we live will be vastly increased. They will be free to design spaces for living that are small enough for a man's presence to be felt and his voice heard. In that case, if we are able to plan our cities, not according to economic necessity, but according to social and individual need, the possibilities seem too vast almost to contemplate. It seems certain though that those groups who have formed humanly, though not necessarily economically, viable communities may well be invaluable as models for the rest of us. The British Columbia Indians are now to some extent using the new communications technology to remain in them. There will be some poetic

justice if the so-called backward Indians are the ones to show the rest of us the way.

January, 1972